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141438Z Nov 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 006695

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CHARGE'S RAMADAN OUTREACH TOUCHES ANKARA'S POOREST

11. (SBU) Summary: During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the Charg carried out an active program to connect with the poorer segments of Ankara's population. In each of her events, which included a visit to Ankara's largest mosque, an iftar dinner, and calls on charitable organizations, the CDA stressed the Embassy's desire to be a good neighbor and participate in the spirit of sharing and charity that characterizes Ramadan. The Turkish response was very appreciative, and media coverage was both positive and extensive. End summary.

Low-Profile Approach Emphasizes Ramadan Spirit

12. (SBU) Given Turkey's unique mix of a fiercely secular elite and widespread religious observance among the broader population, finding the right approach to acknowledge Ramadan is a delicate task. This year, to show respect and appreciation for Muslim traditions without roiling secularists, the CDA led a discreet yet energetic Ramadan outreach schedule. Mixing religious and secular events, Post reached out to lower-income and disadvantaged Turks, using a series of visits and meetings to stress that the Mission is a part of the local community and strives to be a good neighbor.

Touching Base with the Religious Community

13. (U) In an effort to connect with the religious community, the CDA visited Ankara's largest mosque on October 5, the first day of Ramadan. She met with Imam Ismail Cosar, who gave a tour and explained the history of the mosque. The two discussed the common threads in all religions and how respect of others' traditions is essential to reaching greater understanding. The imam cited several verses from the Koran that call for tolerance, sharing, and helping one another. As the CDA was leaving, the imam emotionally said that he found the visit very meaningful.

Reaching Out to Local NGOs

14. (U) On October 6, the CDA and emboffs visited LOSANTE, Turkey's only hospital solely dedicated to treating children with leukemia. Dr. Ustun Ezer, president of the Ankara Foundation of Children with Leukemia (LOSEV), which runs the hospital, gave a tour of the facility and described a "children's cancer village" that LOSEV is planning for the southeastern city of Diyarbakir. He explained that since many of LOSANTE's patients are from outside Ankara, they do not receive the follow-up treatment they need since care is not available in their towns. Dr. Ezer expressed an interest in receiving more corporate sponsorship from American businesses. The CDA congratulated Dr. Ezer on his vision and promised to pass the word about LOSEV to the American business community in Turkey.

15. (U) On October 31, the CDA visited the non-profit Anatolia Modern Education Foundation (ANACEV) women's literacy center in the economically depressed Yildiz neighborhood. Since its founding eight years ago, the center has provided basic literacy, parenting, and handicraft classes to 1400 women living in the numerous shantytowns that surround Turkey's large cities. The CDA toured the facility and met with women in each class. Several of the women were in their 50s and 60s, but explained that they were determined to learn how to read and write in order to empower their families. The children waved Turkish and American flags as we departed.

Welcome in Ankara's Poorest Neighborhoods

16. (U) With urban poverty a growing problem in Turkey, the CDA visited two of Ankara's poorest inner-city

neighborhoods. On October 18, the CDA and emboffs attended an iftar dinner in the Mamak neighborhood hosted by Mamak Mayor Gazi Sahin in one of the tents where free iftar dinners are offered nightly during Ramadan. The mayor said that he and his constituents were very touched that the CDA wanted to share an iftar dinner with them, and expressed his eagerness to establish closer relations with the U.S. The other iftar participants seemed genuinely moved by the Embassy's presence.

17. (U) On October 24, the CDA and emboffs visited Ankara's oldest and poorest neighborhood, Altindag, where 85% of the residents live in substandard housing. The mayor gave a presentation on the poverty alleviation plans underway in the neighborhood and took the group on a tour of the Hayir Carsisi, a municipal government-run charity store that runs solely on donations from businesses and local organizations. Just before the Charge's arrival the Embassy delivered 20 large bags of clothing donated by Embassy staff.

Public Reaction Overwhelmingly Positive

18. (U) Both the press and the public received our outreach very positively. While the Embassy did not request press for any of the events, several media outlets picked up on them and provided straightforward, positive coverage. The daily newspaper Sabah (circulation 450,000) featured an article and photos of the CDA's visit to LOSANTE in its October 7 issue. The Turkish daily newspaper Milliyet (circulation 250,000) featured the CDA's visit to Mamak in its October 21 issue. Daily newspapers Sabah and Cumhuriyet (circulation 45,000) covered the CDA's visit to Altindag. All major Turkish newspapers, including Milliyet, Hurriyet, Sabah, and Radikal, covered the CDA's visit to ANACEV, as did Ankara's major TV networks. In addition, the public warmly welcomed the Embassy's outreach program. At each stop along the way, the CDA and emboffs were applauded for their efforts to share in the Ramadan spirit.

Comment

19. (SBU) Given the dual nature of Turkish society, post found this low-key approach to Ramadan outreach extremely successful. Whether the event was in a secular or religious context, whether with an imam or government official, the Turkish public received the CDA's visits to the less fortunate very positively. Media coverage was straightforward, and usefully counteracted the negative press U.S. policy often receives in Turkey.

McEldowney